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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of family communication environment and parental mediation of television content on third-, sixth-, and ninth-graders' perceptions of realism and similarity of television content and identification with television characters. Subjects, 627 northern California students and 486 of their parents, responded to episodes of "The Cosby Show." Prior to viewing one of three episodes, students completed a questionnaire assessing general background variables, leisure time activities, media use patterns, and family communication patterns. Immediately after viewing, children completed posttest questionnaires. Parents were interviewed via telephone. Active family communication emerged as an important influence, through both direct and indirect paths. Results indicated that family communication helps form children's real-world perceptions, which they compare with television perceptions to assess realism. Results indicated that a mismatch between real-world and television-world perceptions diminishes perceptions of realism and that realism contributes to perceived similarity, which contributes to identification with television characters. Results also showed that through active discussion of television content, the parent directly mediates perceptions of similarity, but not of realism. (Two figures and five tables of data are included. Twenty references are attached.) (MG)

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Influences of Family Communication on Children's Television Interpretation Processes

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Influences of Family Communication on
Children's Television Interpretation Processes

ABSTRACT

A field experiment tests the effects of family communication environment and parental mediation of television content on third-, sixth-, and ninth-graders' perceptions of realism and similarity of television content and identification with television characters. Family communication helps form children's real-world perceptions, which they compare with television perceptions to assess realism. A mismatch between real-world and television-world perceptions diminishes perceptions of realism. Realism contributes to perceived similarity, which contributes to identification with television characters. Through active discussion of television content, the parent directly mediates perceptions of similarity, but not of realism.

Influences of Family Communication on Children's Television Interpretation Processes

Researchers exploring the conditions under which children incorporate television information into their developing constructions of social reality recently have begun to examine such mediating processes as perceived realism, identification, and parental influence (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn & Fallis, 1982; Reeves, 1978; Reeves & Garramone, 1982). Much of the work concerned with children's processing of television information (eg., Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1988; Dorr, 1986; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980) has assumed that children develop their image of the world through a process of comparing or testing new information against prior definitions. Children judge new inputs on such dimensions as utility, congruence, validity and desirability. Both perceived realism and identification are posited to influence such testing or comparison processes.

For example, researchers concerned with perceived realism assume that the more television images are perceived as realistic, the more likely children will incorporate them into their image of social reality and act upon them (Feshbach, 1972; Reeves, 1978). Presumably, perceived realism implies greater validity and utility, either or both of which should increase acceptance, hence incorporation. Other work (eg., Reeves & Garramone, 1982) has examined the role of identification with

television characters. Here the assumption appears to be that children's desire to "be like" a television character indicates that elements of the TV image are perceived as desirable, hence are more likely to be incorporated into the construction of reality than if the child did not identify. Interestingly, although both perceived realism and identification have been used to predict post-viewing behaviors, the relationship between the two remains unclear.

Of course, television messages are only one source of information children use to construct their image of reality--and usually not the primary source. Direct experience and messages from significant others tend to dominate in the socialization process, directly shaping the images children construct. Moreover, they also influence whether and how information from television is processed and incorporated in the image of reality (cf. Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs & Roberts, 1978; Dorr, 1986; Roberts, 1973). A growing literature documents the influence of family role models and of the family communication environment on media use and on children's processing of television information (Chaffee & Tims, 1982; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972; McLeod, et al., 1982; Stone & Chaffee, 1970). In addition, recent theorizing suggests that active communication among family members, particularly as it relates to television content, further enhances the effect of parents on children's interpretations of television, thus affecting how television is

used to construct an image of reality (Messaris & Sarrett, 1981; McLeod, et al., 1982; Corder-Bolz, 1980).

Through active communication, parents go beyond contributing to children's templates for comparison and actively contribute to the reality testing process itself. They help children interpret and evaluate television by categorizing media information, by supplementing media information to enhance its meaning or to put it in perspective, and by validating media information as good or bad, and right or wrong (Messaris, 1982; Messaris & Sarrett, 1981). Indeed, active parent-child communication about media may influence the children's perceptions of media realism even more than do modeling and such socio-structural influences as the general communication environment.

Testing the family's influence on the process

Most "active-communication" theories of family influence remain untested, arrived at through qualitative methods (eg., Messaris & Sarrett, 1981), although some direct evidence of parental mediation of effects has been uncovered (Corder-Bolz, 1980; McLeod, et al., 1982). The current study tests a path model of parental influence to document empirically the role of active family discussion of the media in the child's reality construction process.

We trace the reality construction process through a number of steps, focusing first on the child. Relevant concepts include the child's 1) perceived realism of the content--the extent to

which the content appears to represent the world as the child imagines it to be; 2) perceived similarity of the content--the extent to which the content is perceived as congruent with the child's personal experience; and 3) identification with the content--the extent to which the child wishes to emulate a character or situation portrayed in the content. Perceived realism predicts perceived similarity, which in turn predicts identification.

Parents play both direct and indirect roles in the reality construction process. First, they help to shape children's views of real-life, in relation to which children test media content. Second, parents directly influence children's perceptions of media content through active discussion of content.

Parental perceptions

Our fundamental question is how the parent's constructions of the world are transmitted to the child, and what use the child makes of these constructions when interpreting television. Our model assumes that parents' constructions are shared through communication, as well as via cohabitation. Thus, the first construct in Figure 1 concerns the nature of parent-child communication in general (that is, not necessarily about the media). We assume not only that the content of family communication influences how children define any dimension of their world, but also that the tone and frequency of such exchanges play an important role. A certain amount of

intrafamily communication is necessary to establish roles and rules that maintain order in the family situation. Additional communication, however, may serve the purpose of enjoyment and/or emotional support. Thus, low rates of family communication are likely to be instrumental; high rates of family communication are likely to be supportive--resulting in the generation and sharing of warmth. It follows that more communication engenders perceptions of a warmer communication environment, which in turn facilitate information flow. And the more easily information flows, the more communication takes place, the warmer the perceived environment, and so on.

In this view, the family communication environment affects children's construction of reality both directly and by influencing reality constructions based on interpretations of messages from other sources, including television. We have illustrated this latter point in Figure 1 by including a construct representing children's perceptions of any particular dimension of the world portrayed on television, and linking it to the fundamental construct representing children's perceptions of similar dimensions in the real world. Once they have settled on real-life and television-world perceptions, children can compare them, developing constructions of reality based on everything the child has experienced--both in real life and vicariously through the media--up to this point.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Examining the reality testing process

Hawkins and Pingree (1982) contend that constructions of reality based on television content are at least "relatively rational," and that viewers even may have "an awareness of weighing and balancing information" from various referents, such as from real-life and from the television world. Thus, children may use either real-life or television-portrayed reference groups to determine how to interpret and respond to subsequent groups encountered either in real life or on television. To test our model, we focused on the family as a reference group. The family is an important (perhaps the most important) group for all children. It is also a group frequently portrayed on television in program formats that tend to attract large audiences of children. Thus, for example, viewers could use their own family or a television family (eg., the Huxtables as portrayed on The Cosby Show) as a reference group. Either or both could serve as 1) a normative influence, whose perspectives or situations are accepted as reality; 2) a group to which one aspires to gain acceptance; or 3) a basis for comparison in analyzing the world--which does not necessarily mean that the group is perceived as either normative or realistic (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972).

Following the proposed in Figure 1 further, then, once children have determined what their own and the television

family's environments is like, the two reference groups in combination provide standards against which to reality test subsequent media material. Since reference groups may be perceived as normative, or as objects of aspiration, or as pure bases for comparison, context will determine how children will interpret their own and television's reality. That is, they will select and compare references groups in ways relevant to a particular social reality context. The current model examines this selective process by isolating the contexts in which children evaluate a television family's reality against other families (perceived realism) from the way in which they evaluate a television family's realism against their own families (perceived similarity) and the way in which they choose objects of aspiration (identification).

Our model posits that comparisons of television reality with one's own reality predict perceived realism, which then contributes positively to similarity. By weighing the reference groups of their own reality versus television realities in various ways, children may conclude that television content is realistic, but not necessarily representative of one's own reality. Conversely, because beliefs about oneself and about the rest of the world have been shown to differ, they might perceive a television family as unlike "most real families" even while viewing the media family as like their own family. Their family, after all, may be perceived as different from most other families.

The model illustrates how the process of reality testing contributes to perceived similarity. To weigh television reality against real life, children must compare television reality not only to their own real-life experiences, but also with their impressions of others' real-life experiences. The important issue is whether television's world is perceived as dissimilar to one's own. In such a case, children likely will weigh their own personal experience more heavily than the television portrayal to judge social reality (Brown, Austin & Roberts, 1988). If a mismatch exists between perceptions of own versus television reality, children will be more apt to discount the realism of the television portrayal, perceiving it as unlike social reality, rather than concluding that their own reality is somehow invalid.

The key to this process lies in the various uses to which children apply reference groups. In weighing the realism of television content, children assess a norm. Who can be more normative in one's own personal experience than one's own family? Children cannot logically conclude that their own life experience is unrealistic, however different from others' experiences it may seem. Therefore, in the case of a perceived discrepancy between one's own and most other real families, television reality must meet the criteria set by the child's own experience--own family--to be perceived as realistic.

The perceived realism of television content, then, is not expected to be significantly related to variables representing children's perceptions of their own reality template or of their

perceptions of television's reality. Rather, we expect the absolute difference between evaluations of a reality trait and of a television trait to reflect children's comparison process for evaluating television's realism. This is represented in Figure 1 by the term: "mismatch." In this view, the magnitude of a mismatch, rather than its direction, will determine children's interpretation, with a large discrepancy leading to lower realism ratings.

Perceived realism then will mediate perceived similarity between real-life experience and media material. If the television world seems realistic in the context of one's perceptions of social reality in general, it is more likely to survive closer inspection at a more personal level when children determine whether television reality closely resembles their own reality. Children will take into account the television content's overall realism, reflecting use of the reference group as a basis for comparison. Because the mismatch between television's and one's own reality is taken into account in one's perception of the content's realism, no further interaction between television reality and one's own reality should contribute to the evaluation of perceived similarity.

Parental communication, by forming the basis for the process described above, indirectly mediates the reality construction outcome. It also can exert a direct influence. But we believe that active mediation of television content by the parent influences children's estimates of perceived similarity more than

estimates of perceived realism. Children, after all, are not limited to family-mediated definitions to guide evaluations of television content. They also draw on experiences outside the family in order to assess realism. This is less the case when estimating similarity to one's own experience. In relative terms, at least, parents should exert more influence on perceptions closer to home (that is, regarding content discussed or related to experiences taking place at home) versus those relating to the world at large (that is, discussed or experienced primarily outside the home). The degree to which children perceive television's world to be similar to their own seems closer than more general perceptions of realism. After all, there is a good deal of overlap in the child's own world and the parent's own world.

Children's perceptions of similarity between their own world and television's world, then, are influenced both by their parents' perceptions of such similarity and by amount of parent-child conversation about television. The predicted positive relationship between parents' similarity perceptions and children's similarity perceptions shown in Figure 1 is based on the simple fact of cohabitation, which encompasses all the ways other than explicit conversation through which parents provide information to children. Shared experiences inherent in living together imply a good deal of congruence in similarity perceptions. In addition, explicit parent-child discussion of television should operate to emphasize this relationship, as

illustrated in Figure 1 by the interaction between frequency of such discussion and parents' similarity perceptions. For example, depending on the particular television content under scrutiny, parental comments that a television family "is just like us" ("is not at all like us") provide an unambiguous guide for children to use in their own estimates of similarity. Further, although we do not test the possibility here, insofar as frequency of conversation also indicates intrafamily warmth, it may be positively related to children's desire to model own perceptions on parental perceptions. It follows that amount of parent-child conversation about television should predict the magnitude, but not the direction, of the direct relationship between amount of conversation about television and child's perceived similarity.

Finally, we expect that perceived similarity will mediate identification, which we define as children's desire to emulate the television world in real life. Although perceived similarity may not be a necessary prerequisite for identification, it can lead to identification (Messaris & Sarrett, 1981). Desirability alone might prove a sufficient catalyst for identification, and would be expected to interact with perceived similarity to heighten identification effects. In the current study, however, desirability is controlled.

Summary

In summary, family communication about television content helps form the basis for the real-world template against which children compares television content, effectively contributing to the process by which children make these comparisons. This process is reflected and isolated for study in the current model through children's various uses of real-world and television-world reference groups, depending on whether they are interpreting the content's realism, evaluating the extent to which it is similar to their own experience, or determining whether it represents a desirable model for identification. Parents can directly mediate perceived similarity through active discussion of the television content. More general evaluations of realism by children and the personal determination of identification, however, will be affected by the parent indirectly rather than directly, via the construction of the real-world template and the resulting comparison process.

METHOD

Because children are more likely to analyze critically the media when they can compare media experiences to real-world experiences (Brown et al., 1988), it is helpful to study the social reality construction process in a context familiar to them. The Cosby Show, because it emphasizes family interactions, provides both the opportunity for children to compare their own home environment with that of a television

family and a stimulus about which active family communication is likely, hence can be explored simultaneously with television influences.

Six-hundred-twenty-seven third-, sixth-, and ninth-graders from Northern California public and private schools, and 486 of their parents, responded to episodes of The Cosby Show. Typically, one or two days prior to viewing, children completed a brief pencil-and-paper questionnaire assessing general background variables, leisure time activities, media use patterns, and family communication patterns. No mention of The Cosby Show was made in the pretest questionnaire.

Children then were randomly assigned, within grades, to view one of three episodes (in order to avoid episode-specific effects) in groups of approximately 8-10 children. They saw a half-hour, prerecorded episode of The Cosby Show, including commercials, during regular school hours.

Each episode, selected from the 1987 season, featured one or more of the three youngest Huxtable children (6-year-old Rudy, 13-year-old Vanessa, or 16-year-old Theo) and focused thematically on issues of family communication, individual responsibility, and problem solving within the family context. The plots of the three episodes dealt specifically with 1) Theo's math teacher being invited over for dinner; 2) Rudy making a mess with her father's new electric juicer; and 3) the Huxtable children's first day back at school after summer vacation.

Immediately after viewing, children completed post-test questionnaires. Experimenters[1] read questions aloud to all third graders; assistance in reading items was provided to all participants upon request. The questionnaire assessed children's previous viewing experiences with The Cosby Show, their perceptions of the Huxtable family environment and the family unit, of individual characters, estimates of how these characters compared with members of the participants' own families, how much the children wanted to be like these characters, and whether they thought others would want to be like these characters.

Parents were interviewed via telephone by trained undergraduate and graduate students. They were asked about frequency of coviewing The Cosby Show with their children, frequency of discussing the show, degree of liking for the show, perceptions of the realism of the Huxtable family, perceived similarity between their own family and the Huxtables, perceived similarity of the Huxtables to other television families, and socio-economic characteristics. Over 78% of the parents of participating children responded; most non-responses were due to incorrect or disconnected phone numbers.

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[1] The experimenters included graduate and undergraduate communication students trained in a research practicum at Stanford University.

Measures

Perceived realism was assessed with the question, "The Huxtable Family is like...[most real families; some real families; a few real families; almost no real families]." Perceived similarity was assessed with the question, "The Huxtable family is like my own family...[a lot; somewhat; a little; not at all]." From children, identification was assessed with the question, "I would like to be one of the Huxtable children...[a lot; somewhat; a little bit; not at all]." Frequency of parent-child discussion of television was assessed with the following question to children: "My parent (or guardian) and I talk about things we see and hear on TV...[a lot; sometimes; not very often; almost never]." Parent-child discussion in general was assessed with children's response to "I think a child should discuss [everything; most things; some things; nothing] with his or her parents."

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the participants. There were no significant differences among episode viewing groups on the various dependent measures, so the data were pooled across episodes. Measures of realism and identification were checked for sex, socio-economic, grade, and ethnicity differences. No sex-related differences were found. An index of socio-economic status (SES) was created (alpha = .72) by adding parent's income level and parent's education level. SES was

negatively related to children's perceptions of the Huxtables as similar to most real families ($r = -.12$, $p < .01$). Consistent with the distance hypothesis (Brown, et al. 1988), which holds that viewers can assess television realism more critically if they have real-world experience to bring to bear, this may reflect the dependency of lower-income viewers on television-mediated portrayals of higher-income families. The influence of SES on the rating of Huxtables as like children's own families was significantly and negatively related only for sixth graders ($r = -.16$, $p < .05$), most likely indicating that socio-economic perceptions are not among the more salient aspects of their own families. Grade level was negatively related to perceived realism ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$), presumably reflecting children's developing sophistication and skepticism. Ethnicity was significantly related to perceived realism ($F = 2.75$, $p < .05$), probably indicating that the representation of a black family on television did provide salient cues for children of minority ethnicities. Blacks, as reported in Brown, et al. (1988), were more likely to perceive this black television family as realistic, whereas Hispanic children were less likely to do so.

Insert Table 1 about here

As a result of these patterns, grade level, SES, and ethnicity were controlled in all regression analyses.

The child's basis for comparison

An index of perceived warmth of family environment was developed to operationalize children's perceptions of a particular trait within their own reality. The items comprising the index all came from the pretest questionnaire, and employed 4-point scales. They included: 1. I can laugh and joke with a parent (almost never to very often); 2. We find time to do fun things in out family (hardly ever to very often); 3. I can tell a parent how I feel about something (almost never to very often); 4. My parents and I hug each other (almost never to very often) 5. I think my parents and I talk (not much to a lot). A factor analysis produced a single dimension with factor loadings ranging from .53 to .71; Cronbach's alpha for the index = .65.

A parallel index assessing warmth of the Huxtable family environment operationalized perceptions of a TV-world trait. A factor analysis of the complete index produced a single factor with loadings ranging from .61 to .72, and Cronbach's alpha = .70.[2]

Not surprisingly, the reliability of each index was higher for older than for younger children. Alphas for the warmth of the Huxtables' family environment index improved from .53 for third graders to .71 for sixth graders and .76 for ninth graders.

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[2] The complete questionnaire is available from the first author.

Alphas for the warmth of own family environment index improved from .54 to .70 to .74.

Test of the path model

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed on each path of the model, with Grade, SES, and Ethnicity entered in separate blocks first, as controls. As Figure 2 illustrates, parent-child discussion in general positively predicted the child's perception of warmth in the home communication environment (beta = .18, $p < .05$), supporting the hypothesis that families that communicate about more things would be perceived as warmer. It also conforms to our expectation that active family communication provides a basis for children's perceptions of the family communication environment.

Insert Table 2 about here

Assessing Realism

The correlation between children's perceptions of the warmth of their own family environment and warmth of the Huxtables' family environment was positive but not great enough to cause concern regarding multicollinearity in the regression model predicting realism ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). As predicted, the greater the mismatch between perceptions of one's own and the Huxtables' environments, the less realistic the Huxtables were perceived to be (beta = -.15, $p < .05$). When children whose

own family environment estimates matched their Huxtable family environment estimates were compared with children whose estimates of the families did not match, the means in realism perception differed significantly (on a four-point scale, mean = 2.8 if a mismatch, mean = 3 if a match; $t = 2.15$; $p < .05$).

Insert Figure 2 about here

As expected, perceptions of the warmth of neither the Huxtables' nor the child's own environments were significantly directly related to the perceived realism of the Huxtables. This supports the hypothesis that children weigh their own experiences more heavily than media information, consistent with the distance hypothesis (Brown, et al., 1988). Also as expected, neither the parents' perception of television realism nor parent-child discussion of television were significantly related to the children's perceived realism. This indicates that the parent's influence operates through the hypothesized active communication path, rather than directly.

Insert Table 3 about here

Assessing Perceived Similarity

As predicted, children's perceptions of television reality directly influenced their perceptions of similarity (beta = .22, $p < .01$), implicating the use of the reference group as a basis

for comparison. Parent's perceived similarity (beta = .48, $p < .05$), and the interaction between parent-child discussion of television (beta = .38, $p < .01$--statistically controlled) and parents' perceptions of similarity--that is, active mediation of content--also contributed to the child's perceived similarity (beta = .30[3], $p < .05$). This indicates that active mediation, in addition to relevant socio-structural factors, directly affects the child's evaluation of television content. The total variance explained by the equation was .19 ($p < .001$).

Insert Table 4 about here

Finally, perceived similarity predicted identification, as hypothesized (beta = .21, $p < .01$). The total variance explained by the equation was .17 ($p < .001$), supporting the hypothesis that perceived similarity leads to identification when desirability is controlled.

Insert Table 5 about here

Although education, ethnic and economic differences have been important to previous studies of media realism and social reality perceptions (e.g., Greenberg, 1972, 1974; Donohue &

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[3] Beta weight computed from partial correlation coefficient following a test of the interaction via hierarchical regression, to control for multicollinearity of the independent variables and the interaction term.

Donohue, 1977), their explanatory power in this case was limited. Processual factors emerged as more important predictors. Socio-economic status predicted neither frequency of discussion of The Cosby Show, perceived warmth of one's own or the Huxtable's family environments, nor perceived realism of, similarity of, or identification with the Huxtables. Although ethnicity was a salient characteristic for children of particular backgrounds for assessing similarity or desirability, it did not affect other perceptions. Not surprisingly, Blacks tended to identify more with the Huxtables than did other ethnic groups. Hispanics tended to see them as less similar to their own families than did children of other ethnicities. Grade level, presumably reflecting cognitive sophistication, predicted perceptions of the Huxtable's communication environment and of realism and identification, but did not affect perceived similarity. Even third graders made distinctions between "my own" and most other families.

DISCUSSION

This analysis illustrates the importance of family communication processes to children's constructions of reality. Active family communication emerged as an important influence, through both direct and through indirect paths. The data support the hypothesis that parents' views influence children's judgments through active commentary (Corder-Bolz, 1980; Messaris & Sarrett, 1981).

Active parent-child communication formed the basis for the real-world template against which the child compared the Huxtable family, thereby affecting the process by which the child makes these comparisons. This process was disentangled through examination of the child's use of comparable real-world and television-world reference groups. The hypothesis that reference groups would be used in accordance with the distance hypothesis to determine perceived realism was supported, with the child's own reality taking precedence over television reality in determining what social reality must be like. In addition, the hypothesis regarding the path of influence, including the contribution of realism to perceived similarity, as well as the contribution of perceived similarity to identification, was supported. Perceived realism mediated perceived similarity, and realism and similarity, while correlated ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), were arrived at via different processes. In addition, with desirability controlled, perceived similarity led to identification. The regression equations, which controlled for grade level, indicated that even young children appear to apply sophisticated comparative processes to assessments of television realism.

Direct parental mediation, the discussion of the parent's views of the television content with the child, is most successful in shaping the child's perceptions of television's match to the real world. When children make evaluations regarding the world at large, however, they take into account

sources outside the family. Because parents are not the only source for information about the outside world, their direct influence is less strong. This is not to say that parents exert no influence; rather, parental influence is more indirect, as illustrated by the path model.

This model did not test the parent's ability to mediate identification directly. Since perceived similarity contributes to identification, however, parents can mediate identification by calling attention to similarities and dissimilarities between the child's world and the television world. It is unclear whether the parent successfully pointing out dissimilarities between a television character and a child also might discourage identification through more direct means, such as by suggesting, "You don't really want to be like that character."

These results may strengthen researchers' concerns that television's role as a social agent can be overly strong in the absence of active family communication about such material. Evidence has been presented elsewhere that scarcely half of parents report talking "often" with their children about television content (Corder-Bolz, 1980), and these data illustrate that children apply more weight to their real-world impressions from their own family experiences than to the media. In the absence of relevant information from real-life, however, such as from family communication, television may provide unique social information, which may be more readily accepted by children. This may occur particularly if the child identifies with a

character, which increases the likelihood of the child adopting the social values the character portrays (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Bandura, 1986).

Evidence points to a critical viewer

Such concerns, although consistent with our results, should not lead to overly strong assumptions about television's impact on children whose parents provide little television-related commentary. The importance of family communication in this study does illustrate the vulnerability of children who have acquired little relevant knowledge to apply to the analysis of media messages. But these results also indicate that even young children apply rather sophisticated strategies to television information; they do not simply absorb television images and values like a sponge.

Distinctions between realism and identification

This study illustrates conceptual differences between realism and identification that are too often overlooked. By documenting the different ways children may use the same reference groups to form perceptions of realism, similarity, and desirability, the results challenge the cultivation assumption that one's "demographic reality" perceptions and one's "personal reality" perceptions are the same (Gerbner, et al., 1980). For example, although realism and similarity are correlated, they seem to be arrived at by quite different strategies.

Such results question the cultivation assumption that accepting television as like the real world in terms of demographic beliefs should lead to acceptance of the television world in terms of one's personal beliefs. Even the youngest children in this study perceived their own situation as different from others'. Contrary to cultivation theory's premise of unconscious acquisition of television "facts" rather than the critical evaluation of media messages (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982), then, our results indicate that children apply highly rational strategies when interpreting media content. Indeed, we found no direct effect of television content on assessments of realism.

Conclusions

In general, the data support a theory of an active, selective child viewer, who applies rational, complex analysis strategies to media material depending on the context, and whose parents affect this process through active communication about the material. They further point to the family, both as a real-life reference group for comparison and as a reliable source of information about the media and the rest of the world, as a fundamental aid, helping the child develop sophisticated strategies for analyzing the media world.

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Figure 1

Path model of family communication effects on child's construction of reality from media content

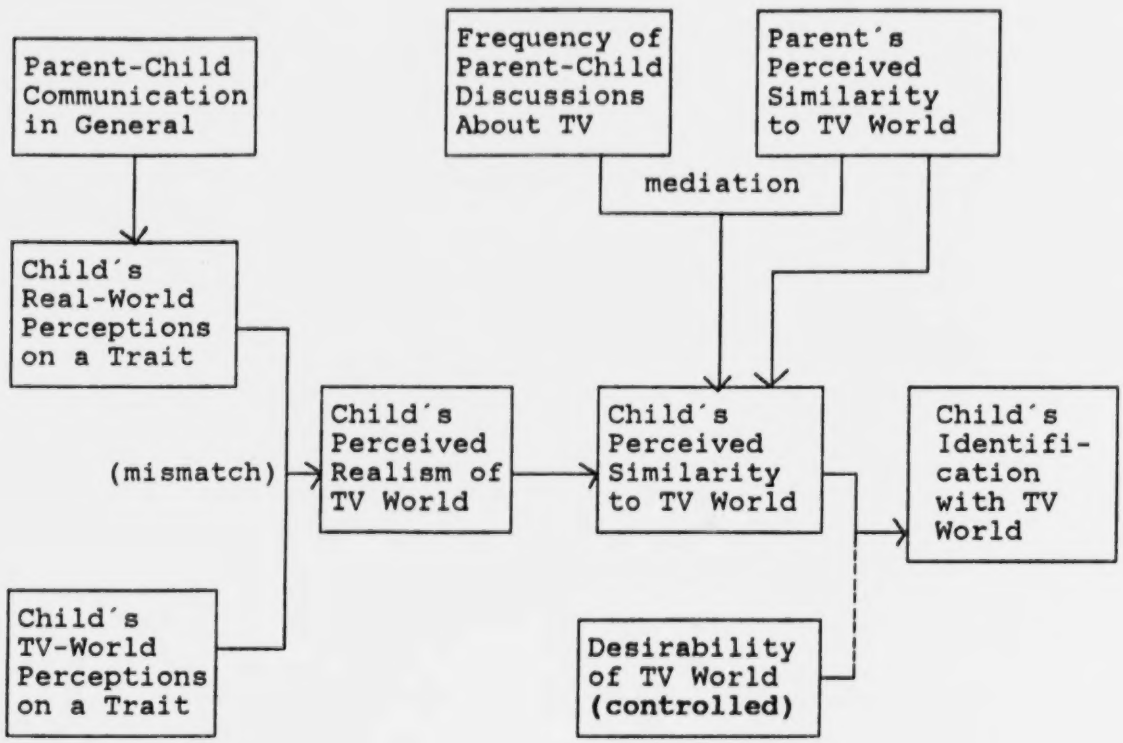

Parent-Child Communication in General
Frequency of Parent-Child Discussions About TV
Parent's Perceived Similarity to TV World
mediation
Child's Real-World Perceptions on a Trait
(mismatch)
Child's Perceived Realism of TV World
Child's Perceived Similarity to TV World
Child's Identification with TV World
Child's TV-World Perceptions on a Trait
Desirability of TV World (controlled)

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of sample population

	N		N
Sex of Child		Sex of Parent	
Male	309	Male	150
Female	308	Female	336
(N=617)		(N=486)	
Ethnicity		Parent's Education	
Asian	61	< High School	66
Black	47	High School Grad	126
Hispanic	103	Some College	120
White	261	College Grad	120
Other*	139	Post-Grad	54
(N=611)		(N=486)	
Child's Grade Level		Income	
Third	227	< $10,000	33
Sixth	261	10-19	45
Ninth	132	20-29	99
(N=620)		30-39	75
		40+	193
		(N=445)	

Mean Realism Scores (on scale of 1-4)

Parent	2.6	(N=373)
Child	2.9	(N=607)

Mean Similarity Scores (on scale of 1-4)

Parent	2.4	(N=379)
Child	2.3	(N=605)

* Children who reported themselves as "other" were not included in the regression analyses

Table 2

Standardized betas from hierarchical regression of parent-child discussion on the child's perception of warmth in the home communication environment (N=621)

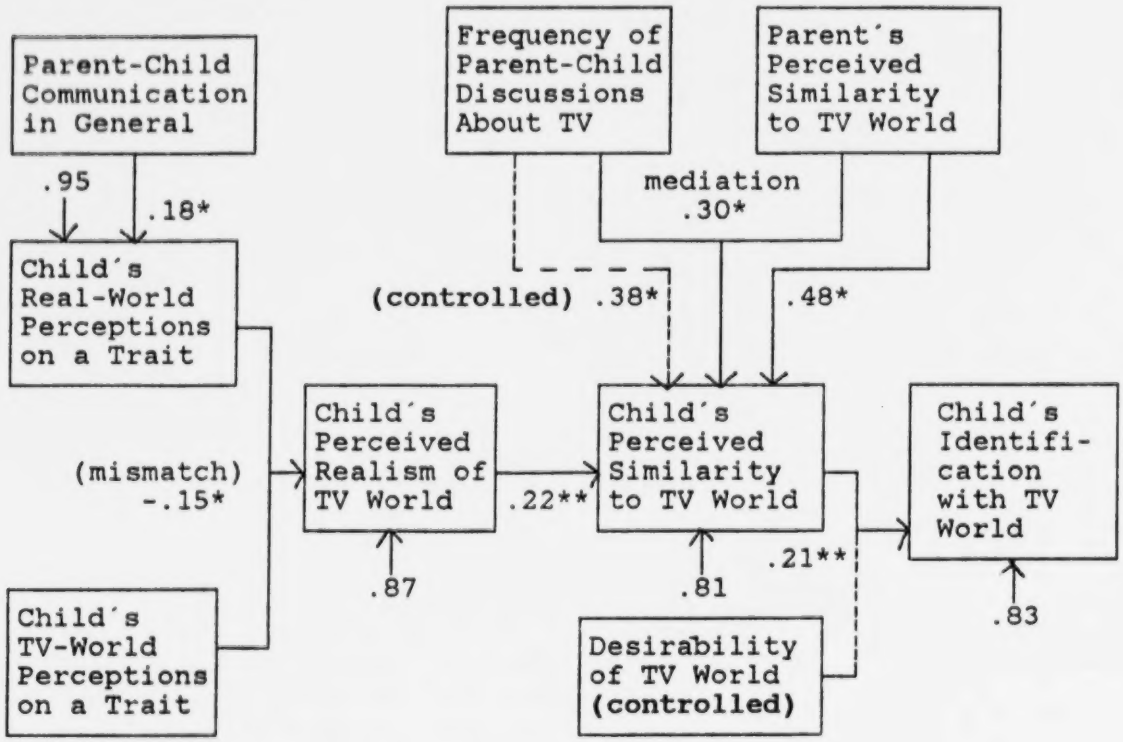
Block Entered	Grade	SES	Ethnicity			Par.-Child Discussion
			Black	Asian	Hispanic	
1	-.04					
2		-.02				
3			-.06	-.12	-.12	
4						.18*
ΔR^2	.00	.00			.02	.03*
R^2	.00	.00			.02	.05

* $p < .05$

Note: Standardized betas are the values from the final block of the equation rather than from the block of entry.

Figure 2

Regressions of family communication path on child's construction of reality from media content



* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Note: Ethnicity, grade level and SES entered as controls in all equations.

Table 3

Standardized betas from hierarchical regressions of child's real-world/TV-world comparison on perceived realism of TV world (N=621)

Block Entered	Grade	SES	Ethnicity			Real-World Perc.	TV-World Perc.	Magnitude[4] of mismatch
			Black	Asian	Hispanic			
1	-.24**							
2		.05						
3			.10	.07	.06			
4						.00	-.03	-.15*
5								
ΔR^2	.08***	.00			.02			
R^2	.08***	.08***			.10***			

Block Entered	Parent's Perceived Realism	Frequency Parent-Child Discuss TV	Parental Mediation of Realism[5]
1			
2			
3			
4	.01	-.04	
5			.13
ΔR^2		.03	.00
R^2		.13**	.14**

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Note: Standardized betas are the values from the final block of the equation rather than from the block of entry.

[4] Mismatch computed by subtracting perception of Huxtables' Home Communication Environment from own Home Communication Environment. Magnitude is the mismatch squared.

[5] Mediation measure created by multiplying Frequency of Discussion of TV with Parent's Perceived Realism of TV Content.

Table 4

Standardized betas from hierarchical regressions of child's perceived realism of TV world and parental mediation on child's perceived similarity (N=621)

Block Entered	Grade	SES	Ethnicity			Par.'s Perc. Simil.	Freq. P-C Discuss TV	Child's Perc. Realism
			Black	Asian	Hisp.			
1	-.02							
2		.04						
3			.09	-.14	-.23**			
4						.48*	.38**	.22**
5								
ΔR^2	.00	.00			.08***			.09***
R^2	.00	.00			.09**			.17***

Block Entered	Parental Mediation of Similarity[6]
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	.30*
ΔR^2	.02*
R^2	.19****

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Note: Standardized betas are the values from the final block of the equation rather than from the block of entry.

[6] Parental Mediation measure created by multiplying Frequency of Discussion of TV with Parent's Perceived Similarity of TV World.

Table 5

Standardized betas from hierarchical regression of perceived similarity on the child's identification with television characters (N=621)

Block Entered	Grade	SES	Ethnicity			Perceived Similarity
			Black	Asian	Hispanic	
1	-.26***					
2		.07				
3			.17*	-.13	.01	
4						.21**
ΔR^2	.06***	.00			.07**	.04**
R^2	.06***	.06**			.13***	.17****

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Note: Standardized betas are the values from the final block of the equation rather than from the block of entry.